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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 HILLAH 000096

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/30/2017
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: KARBALA: GOVERNOR PUTS HIS HEART INTO THE
TRANSFER OF THE SECURITY FILE

REF: REFTEL 000005

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CLASSIFIED BY: Andrea Donnally, Acting Team Leader, Karbala
Provincial Reconstruction Team, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) This is a corrected copy of Hillah 00000095 (wrong
classification) a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Karbala
classified cable.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: On June 27, Karbala Governor Aqeel Mahmood
al-Khazali met with 3ID Deputy Commanding General (DCG) and PRT
representatives at the Regional Embassy Office (REO) in
al-Hillah. This was the first meeting between these parties
since the PRT was denied access to the province ostensibly under
the Governor's command. The meeting began with a discussion of
the Anbar Salvation Council and a seemingly similar committee in
Karbala province. Feigning heart palpitations, the Governor
shifted the conversation to manageable topics such as the
transition to Iraqi control, an upcoming tourism conference and
a future Anbar-Karbala security dialogue. The Governor agreed
without hesitation to the transition of Karbala to Iraqi control
and is scheduled to travel with 3ID representatives in July to
present the request for consideration to senior Coalition Forces
(CF) and Embassy representatives. Al-Khazali was apologetic
about the PRT's recent difficulty in accessing the province and
agreed that free access is needed. The PRT continues to seek
out alternatives to facilitate travel and engagement
opportunities with Karbala government and non-government
interlocutors. END SUMMARY

¶3. (C) General Cardon opened the meeting by showing the Governor
a recent news clipping describing a newly formed Karbala
security committee. Before complaining of heart palpitations
and requesting medication, al-Khazali explained that he inspired
its formation. He did not elaborate further on the committee or
its specific function, however, the PRT did report on the
formation of this committee on May 12 in a situational report to
the Office of Provincial Affairs. This committee was formed
after the two April car bombs in downtown Karbala that wounded
and killed more than 400 civilians and resulted in the arrest of
15 suspected terrorists. Media reporting from that period
attributes the formation of these committees to Sistani's
representatives at the holy shrines in Karbala as a response to
the insecurity created by the car bombs. Six other committees
were formed at the same time to engage parliament members, the
local religious Hawza, the tribes, and the media. The last two
committees that were formed provide social support and
coordinate the efforts of the other six committees. Governor
al-Khazali agreed to provide the PRT with further information

about the security committee. It is unclear what relationship any of these committees have with local security forces (ISF) and the provincial government (SEPTTEL).

14. (C) Governor Al-Khazali immediately agreed to the DCG's offer to transfer the Karbala security file. The Governor explained that he had obtained authorization from the Ministry of Defense for two Iraqi Army brigades, which is in addition to recent authorization granted by the Ministry of Interior for two thousand foot police. He explained that the GEN Mahon, the director of the Joint Coordination Center (a security coordination cell in the Governorate), is having success fighting militias and that security is generally good. During the last six months Governor al-Khazali balked and hesitated about the transfer of security citing militia infiltration and instability as the reason for his disinclination. The Governor was both stalling for time with CF and lobbying both CF and GOI for equipment, training and Iraqi soldiers. Upon receiving his wish list from the GOI, he made clear his intention to sever military cooperation with CF. On June 28, locally engaged staff and CF reported that GEN Mahon was unexpectedly transferred to Basra and that a LTG Salah has taken his place. The number of monthly assassinations and other terrorist activities appear to be stable, however USG interpreters continue to be under severe threat of assassination. On June 26, a long time Karbala police officer and interpreter for CF was assassinated. This raised fears with PRT staff and the few remaining CF interpreters in the province.

15. (C) In May, the Mayor of Ain Tamur, a northwestern district that shares a border with Anbar, requested PRT assistance in engaging the Anbari government in a dialogue about cross border terrorist activities. For the last six months, Karbala ISF has been reporting suspected Sunni extremist and AQI terrorist movement around the Anbar-Karbala border, threatening the security of the province. Following up on that request, at the meeting, the PRT inquired about the Governor's interest in meeting with his Anbar counterpart. Al-Khazali expressed an interest in meeting with his Anbar counterpart and appeared

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flexible regarding a date. He reminded the PRT of a recent assassination in Ain Tamur of six individuals, including a local council member by unknown assailants. PRT Anbar has already laid the groundwork with the Anbar Governor and it appears that there is potential for a dialogue, a first for these two Governors. Where Anbar is a predominantly Sunni province, Karbala is its Shi'a counterpart, except for Ain Tamur which is rural, mostly tribal and a little of both. The PRT is in close contact with PRT Anbar and is monitoring developments. (SEPTTEL)

16. (C) The investigation into the January attack on CF at the Governance Compound (REFTEL) and PRT mobility are closely intertwined. CF repeatedly requested the results of the ISF investigation into the January attack, however the local government has been less than forthcoming. At this meeting the DCG pressed the need for Karbala to share the results of its investigation to which al-Khazali hesitated. He cited the inconclusiveness and poor level of professionalism of the report. Despite his hesitation, on June 28, al-Khazali emailed the PRT an Arabic and English translation of the report, which has since been forwarded to 3ID. As al-Khazali claimed, the interviews with police officers at the scene were short and superficial. The conclusions reached through the investigation, based primarily on the profile of the attack, forms the basis for the governor's current justification for restrictions the PRT movement.

17. (C) Upon arriving to the REO, al-Khazali asked the PRT representative about their recent trip to the province. Such a jab obviated the need to address the mobility of the PRT during the meeting. Governor Aqeel cited the profile of the PRT security convoy as problematic given the province's current security posture. He cited the findings of the January Governance Compound attack as the logical basis for the restriction. He also reminded his interlocutors that a recent

attack on the Ministry of Finance that resulted in the kidnapping of five British citizens employed a similar profile to the January attack in Karbala. Governor al-Khazali recommended that the PRT provide his office with 24-hour advance notice of PRT movement to the province with the names of the principals, the routes and the times of travel. This detail of information sharing is unacceptable for a province that claims to have severe militia infiltration among the ISF, general insecurity and is known to have a historically anti-American leaning. A veiled threat to stop reconstruction project funding inspired the Governor to concede that the PRT should enjoy unfettered access to the Province. Despite the Governor's recognition of PRT's need for mobility, at this time it is difficult to assess if a consensus can be reached to the satisfaction of Embassy security requirements and within reach of the Karbala security posture.

¶18. (U) The meeting ended with the al-Khazali agreeing to support a future south central regional governor's conference in the near future. He explained that the monthly Governors' conferences in Baghdad were going well and that at the last one; representatives from all 18 provinces were present.

¶19. (S) COMMENT: Engagements with the Karbala Governor are always unpredictable. He likely feigned a medical condition to disrupt the flow of the meeting and to ensure a plausible escape route if discussion topics became too difficult. His condition limited the depth of the conversation, but did not prevent considerable advancements in the Karbala-USG dialogue. The Governor's solid approval of the transfer of the security file was an unusual turn of events in that previous discussions on the topic revealed the Governor's concern about militia infiltration in the ISF, particularly the police, and an unraveling security condition. Over the course of the last two months a new Police Chief and Emergency Response Unit Commander (suspected of having very close ties to the Prime Minister) may actually have turned the tables on militia activity in the province. Additionally, more than 4,000 more Iraqi Army and Karbala foot police are expected to be on the ground and working in the very near term. More is not always better, but in the case of a province with 60 percent unemployment and more than 3 million pilgrims visiting monthly, the additional law enforcement may be a much needed reprieve for the over burdened police force. COMMENT CONTINUED

¶10. (S) COMMENT CONTINUED: Karbala PRT movement is most likely untenable. Intelligence reports on militia activity, whenever available, describes a severe risk environment to American convoys. Moreover, Embassy security protocols call for convoys to pass unrestrained through security checkpoints, which is in direct conflict with Provincial security procedures. The Governor agreed to provide the PRT with a letter of transit and offered an Iraqi Army escort, however these options conflict with Embassy protocols, which makes them a non-starter. The Karbala PRT is negotiating mobility with the Governor from a

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disadvantaged position, where it is imprudent to demand unfettered access, and yet cooperation with the local government may increase the risk level against the PRT. However, the increased resources and focus of the newly arrived MND-Central 3ID Division command, has the PRT cautiously optimistic about the potential for mobility within the province. The PRT is keenly aware that limited engagement on a random and infrequent basis is more likely to draw negative attention to our interlocutors and undermine their security than further the USG mission. Therefore, with the support of the 3ID leadership and a moderately cooperative Karbala Governor, the PRT will continue to use creative methods of engagement and seek opportunities to travel when prudent to do so. END COMMENT
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